Urban Land Institute

Office Boundaries and Open Spaces

When RP3 Agency, a Bethesda, Maryland–based advertising, marketing, and communications firm, moved into new offices in 2010, the organization knew it wanted to pursue an open-plan office concept. Working in the creative world of advertising, where collaboration is a priority and teams are often highly interconnected, agency leaders wanted a space that would support such an environment.

"Those walls don't exist on an organizational chart anymore," explains agency creative director Jim Lansbury. "So why should they exist in your space?"

Today, the RP3 workspace has only six private offices, and the rest of the 32-member staff works in an open space nicknamed "the pit." The office's entrance space resembles a coffee shop, and push-pin boards are positioned throughout the space so employees can post ideas. Two glass conference rooms are available for private calls or meetings, but the environment serves a predominantly collaborative function.

The open-plan office concept has received considerable press attention, with such Silicon Valley giants as Google and Facebook providing employees with innovative space fitted out with ping-pong tables and colorful, modern furniture in open, nontraditional layouts. According to research by global architectural firm NBBJ, cited in a New York Times article March 17, up to two-thirds of U.S. office space uses an open layout to at least some degree. Yet, while one of the latest trends in office design may be such open, collaborative office space—complete with communal tables and devoid of cubicles, private offices, and many of the other hallmarks of traditional workplace culture—for some businesses it may make sense to take a more measured approach to workplace design.

The open-plan concept is a common topic in broad discussions of the nature of the workplace, the importance of collaboration, and the transition away from the traditional vision of executives ensconced in private offices and junior employees relegated to high-walled cubicles. Evolving ideas about the

workplace now include discussion of a "third place" for workers, notes Gina Berndt, a principal global interior design discipline leader at Perkins+Will, as firms and their employees grapple with the migration of the workforce to a flexible environment that sometimes resembles a hybrid between an office and a Starbucks.

Officials at office furniture manufacturer Herman Miller have noticed a move away from high walls and panels and spacious individual offices toward lower-walled, smaller workstations. Technology, as well as real estate pressures that predate the financial crisis, have driven these changes, says Gretchen Gscheidle, Herman Miller's director of insight and exploration. "Organizations are really trying to figure out, 'How can we make our real estate work harder?'" Gscheidle says. Contributing to the shift are generational changes, including the perceived demand among younger workers for a more social atmosphere and a desire by employers to facilitate knowledge transfer in a casual setting between older and younger workers, she says.

Still, challenges remain in the implementation of open-plan office concepts. For instance, many Washington, D.C., attorneys and lobbying firms worry about privacy and confidentiality, which may preclude them from embracing open, collaborative space, says Greg Tomasso, vice president for leasing at the Washington commercial real estate firm Akridge. In recent years, when such professional firms have relocated or reduced the square footage of their offices, they were doing so in response to economic pressures, with a focus on maximizing the "utilization rate" of their space, he says.

Kristine Woolsey, an architect at Woolsey Studio in Phoenix, says that while she has seen older, more established companies express interest in open-plan office design in the past several years, some on the leading edge of the trend are now adopting slight revisions to address employees' concerns about privacy and noise. Among these changes are designating certain areas of the office as quiet places and mandating that employees use headphones rather than speakers to limit noise. At some companies, wearing headphones can also be a signal that the individual is busy and unable to talk, even within the open-plan design. Says Woolsey of working in an open-plan environment, "It's not something that everybody can do all the time."

Beyond the question of privacy, the issue of focusing and concentrating on tasks within an open environment remains a concern for some people. "These kinds of spaces are being balanced by spaces where workers can have heads-down focus when they need it," says Berndt. She notes one constituency that may need to be addressed in the open-plan office design equation—introverts, who are cited in Susan Cain's recent book Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking.

Designers and firms have taken some steps toward addressing these concerns. Jaime Velez, director of interiors at architecture and engineering firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in Chicago, says that though the company has not worked with any U.S. law firms to implement open-plan office design, several law firms in the U.K. have moved toward the concept. Confidentiality and privacy can be protected by developing some enclosed spaces within the open environment, as well as by managing acoustics and allowing more distance between workspaces, he says. The firm also advocates pilot testing of open-plan office design before clients fully commit to converting an entire office, Velez says.

Global accounting firm Ernst and Young employs a "hoteling" concept in which employees reserve a workplace for a time but do not retain a permanent, specific private space. But the firm also has kept some traditional office-space practices. "We have retained private offices for our partners and directors because of privacy concerns," says Sam Unger, Americas real estate leader in global procurement. "This system has helped us to maximize our office space use and has reduced our carbon footprint, as well as our cost structure."